

NEW BABYLON: Kozintsev, Trauberg, Shostakovich

AN OPEN LETTER TO PORDENONE FESTIVAL DIRECTOR DAVID ROBINSON

The Pordenone Festival's gala opening 2011 was Kozintsev and Trauberg's *New Babylon* (1929), accompanied by the Mitteleuropa Orchestra conducted by Mark Fitz-Gerald, who is also conducting the Basel Sinfonietta on a forthcoming Naxos CD release of the score. However, contrary to the impression given by the Pordenone festival director in his notes to the festival, the issue of the correct synchronisation of the film for which Shostakovich wrote one of his most magnificent scores is a complex one.

Leonid Trauberg, throughout his long career, was quite happy to sow chaos and discord wherever his own work was concerned. His first advice, while authorising my work on his film and career, was to *"deny anything that has been discovered"*. Five years later, in 1983, when we met, he made it perfectly plain that this included anything he was on record as ever having claimed.

In a 1983 UK interview Trauberg stated :

"I think it is better there are opinions about this film. One opinion about a film is dubious. The people divided, enemies and friends divided in battle, that was better for us."

In personal conversation with him (five years after introducing the FEKS director to the British Film Institute when the Home Office had denied him an entry visa into the UK), he told me:

"No wonder they're having trouble synchronising it. Three days (sic "three weeks" MP) before the premiere we re-cut the film completely."

My view is that Shostakovich originally scored a 93-minute film running at 24 frames per second.

It is officially recorded, and was confirmed by both Kozintsev & Trauberg, that Shostakovich played his piano version at a successful February 1929 preview in Leningrad. Studio sources also confirm that the score was completed. Shortly afterwards however and in the midst of intense debates about the nature of "formalism" in Soviet cinema, three weeks before the film's premiere, the Moscow branch of the production studio ordered extensive cuts.

This removed 178 of the film's 1,349 shots, 510 of its 2,580 metres (Mr Robinson's claim of 700 metres is excessive). Though, overall, 20% of the film was removed, each reel suffered differently. 24% was cut from Reel 1; 22% from Reel 2; 36% was cut from Reel 3; 15% of Reel 4 was cut; 7% was cut from reel 5 and 13% was cut from Reel 8. Many shots were also moved within the film. Naturally, this meant that the composer had to radically refashion his finished and synchronised score to fit the re-edited (and some would argue, censored), print. In the time available, these efforts failed, resulting only in chaos at 1929 Moscow and Leningrad premieres. The film was never performed correctly and the score was withdrawn within a matter of days.

Shostakovich, writing about his music before the film was re-edited, clearly stated that the whole work would *"sink if it were projected at any speed that suits..."* and the simple fact is that that the version of the film in common circulation – and which the Pordenone Festival presumably chose to present - is not that for which the music was originally written. Clearly, within the confines of the Pordenone programme book it is impossible to give a detailed breakdown of how their print (from the Cineteca del Friuli) compares to other available versions. Indeed, there is no indication whatsoever of this but, given David Robinson's remarks, we must assume it is broadly in line with the shortened version. In order to circumvent the "problem" of length – basically "too much music" - most presentations from 1975 onwards have simply slowed down the projection speed, 'lengthening' the film to match the score and re-edited the music whenever deemed convenient. This is exactly the approach taken at Pordenone, which chose to project the film at 20fps.

My own work on the film, which Mr Robinson kindly notes in his programme to the Pordenone screening, was outlined in a paper jointly given with Russian silent cinema scholar and FEKS specialist Natalia Noussinova and published by the Cinematheque Royale de Belgique. A friend of the Trauberg family, Ms Noussinova's own interviews with Leonid Trauberg in the last years of his life detailed, for

the first time, the last-minute changes made to his and Kozintsev's film after the music had been written and the film submitted for final approval.

My later paper, delivered to the University of Chicago, went into this process in more detail and drew on more recent research to confirm Trauberg's last interviews, poured cold water on his 1981 "Ghent Statement" (quoted by Mr. Robinson) and justify my work in reconstructing *New Babylon*. This was premiered in Chicago under the baton of Ms. Barbara Schubert, incorporating all the surviving "missing" footage for which the film had been scored in its original intended form as the USSR's first orchestral sound film.

In May 2009 the restoration received its UK premiere at Opera North. Working with Mr. Fitz-Gerald, whom I had introduced into my production, we intensively investigated the film, its original, formalist structure, and synchronised it with Shostakovich's original score, performed at 24fps. This used the newly published DSCH Edition full score and a copy of the original manuscript held at the Institut Chostakovich Paris; access made possible by the Institute's director Emmanuel Uitwiller and the gracious kindness of Madame Irina Shostakovich with whom I had met and discussed my work in the company of former Centre National du Cinema and FIAF director Madame Michelle Aubert.

We also agreed to reinstate the original scripted and scored finale, which received its world premiere performance at Opera North under Mark's baton and my direction. Though the footage for this section does not exist – or remains to be discovered – we presented title cards using the published script. From the available documentation, it is unclear how the Pordenone Festival has dealt with the several minutes of music for which there is currently no film.

From the start, my own and Mark's aim in this production was to present the film and its music in the form the composer (and indeed directors) originally foresaw and intended it to be seen. I have no doubt that as a result of our work Mark's performance and direction of the music at Pordenone has, as the festival claims, indeed been "definitive" – though both he and I know that there was still work to be done on the film as a whole.

However, what cannot be claimed to be "definitive" by any stretch of the imagination is the print of the film to which his performance and our joint research has now been matched and I am accordingly mystified why he agreed to the Pordenone engagement.

The failure of the festival to screen the film for which the music to *New Babylon* was composed – for that is what it is - deprives the Pordenone audience of the opportunity to engage with the true meaning of this superb film, and the nature of Kozintsev and Trauberg's Factory of the Eccentric Actor's "formalism".

Soviet censorship, though widespread to such degree that it was to affect just about every film which survives, sometimes affected scenes that seem to us so innocuous that it is difficult to understand, especially when different cuts were ordered for domestic and export prints. To present it simply as a question of political censorship would be as simplistic as to deny that there could have been an element of that. Many cuts were structural and their restoration into a film such as *New Babylon* reveals the directors' and composer's intended complex interwoven web of musical / visual narratives. However, before any such evaluation can be made, the original text of the film has to be established.

My reconstruction of *New Babylon* uses material from two incomplete prints:

- One, 2,070 metres, widely available through the Gosfilmofond archives in Moscow and generally assumed to be the complete film - distributed in Europe for over twenty years by Contemporary Films London and more recently available on DVD. The print screened at Pordenone.

- The second, a unique 35mm German-language print of 2,050 metres kindly made available by the Cinémathèque Suisse who, presciently, had preserved their nitrate copy. This 1929 German export version (entitled *Der Kampf um Paris*) includes nearly all the footage cut just three weeks before the film's scheduled premiere, reinstalled under directions from the studio.

These materials were transferred from 35mm positives to High Definition and re-edited into their original order - in the process synchronising more accurately with Shostakovich's score. New full-size English inter-titles, translated from the Russian and German originals, were designed in Berthold Block font to match the visual tone of the original Cyrillic.

David Robinson writes, sadly without consulting me at any point, that I am on record as claiming the Cinematheque Suisse print:

“as the only authentic, unedited version of New Babylon”

This is not the case and I am mystified as to how Mr. Robinson might have got this idea or whether he has seen my reconstruction. Despite its superb quality and fascinating content, many sequences are missing from the Cinematheque Suisse print that remain preserved in the Gosfilmofond version. One might ask though why footage excised just a short time previously was suddenly required to be reinstated, and was in fact done so with Kozintsev's full acknowledgement in typical (for the time) laconic style, whereas In 1983 Trauberg claimed to David Robinson and others that he had no knowledge of how the material had got there. Indeed it was not until the late 1980's that he accurately recounted the editing process in detail to Ms. Natalia Noussinova in a series of important interviews with her.

The abridged print of *New Babylon* being screened by Pordenone, remains to my mind a product of the Brezhnev years of artistic conformity and stagnation, though of course it was produced at the cusp of the Stalinist crack down on the arts. Yes it is magnificent, but it is also a sad reminder of the many works neutered of “deviationist” thinking before similar strictures were applied to Soviet artists such as the great theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold – murdered in a police cell - or for that matter, Adrian Piotrovskii, head of scenarios at Lenfilm at the time of *New Babylon*, (author of articles such as “*October Must be Re-edited*” published a year earlier, in May 1928) and who nevertheless died in prison just ten years later, quite possibly directly as a result of his work with Shostakovich.

No one, least of all the Pordenone audience, would deny the validity of restoring missing footage to Eisenstein's *October* or the 20-plus % which remains absent from *Battleship Potemkin* (or matching it to Meisel's score which the director claimed had turned his film into a musical). So why the reticence over the reconstruction of *New Babylon*, and its superb early formalist Shostakovich score ? Certainly the validity of the abridged form in which it has been shown at Pordenone has been conclusively undermined by recent research, and not least by Mark Fitz-Gerald, the conductor himself, in our earlier and detailed collaboration.

The full length High Definition reconstruction and production of “The New Babylon”, with music guide track for conductors, is available to orchestras, film festivals and promoters for High Definition Digital presentation through the film's original European distributors:

Contemporary Films London. www.contemporaryfilms.com

For those interested, Kozintsev & Trauberg's “Eccentric Manifesto” of 1922 is available online at:

<http://www.newbabylon.co.uk/em/emcover.html>

Mr Robinson's programme notes for the Pordenone Silent film Festival event can be read here:

http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/allegati/GCM11cat-02_SHOSTAKOVICH.pdf

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